DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 461 EA 006 738

AUTHOR Henson, Owen M.
TITLE The Schools-Within-a-School Program at Topeka West High School.
PUB DATE Feb 75
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Secondary Principals (59th, Las Vegas, Nevada, February 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Assistant Principals; *Decentralized School Design; *High School Organization; *House Plan; *Program Descriptions; Secondary Education; Secondary School Counselors; Student Attitudes; *Student School Relationship

ABSTRACT

Topeka West High School has approximately 1,500 students divided into four houses of 375 students. An effort is made to randomly distribute the incoming sophomores equally among the four houses. Each house has an assistant principal, a counselor, and a staff of 8 to 10 teachers representing the instructional areas of English, social studies, and mathematics. The more specialized areas of art, music, home economics, industrial arts, and science and a media center are located in separate facilities. The school is a campus arrangement, and each house is a separate building. The decentralization of the administrative and guidence function enables the assistant principal-counselor team to know and care for a relatively small group of students over a three-year period. (Author/MLF)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

NASSP CONVENTION
FEBRUARY 1975
OMH

ED101461

The Schools-Within-a-School Program at Topeka West High School

by Owen M. Henson

I would like to begin these remarks by stating that I am listed on the program as an assistant superintendent Actually, I am six months removed from the high school principalship of Topeka West High School in Topeka, Kansas.

In recent months I have reflected back on those thirteen years, and I consider them to be most rewarding and exciting. The only constant during that thirteen-year period was change.

A high school is filled daily with unbelievable drama, high moments of happiness, drudgery, deep periods of gloom and despondency; but most important of all, there are scattered occasions of overwhelming reward.

A high school principal has no choice but to expect the unexpected.

The day of the authoritarian all knowing, grand old patriarch high school principal is dead and gone. The modern principal if he is to be effective must have highly developed listening and communication skills. He must have empathic understanding of youth coupled with an appreciation of their individual worth.

I firmly believe that perhaps the most important educational decision that a Board of Education and/or a Superintendent makes is the selection of the building principal.

To return to the central purpose of this presentation, I will be describing to you the schools-within-a-school organization as it has been implemented at Topeka West High School.

The rationale behind the S.W.S. organization at Topeka West High School is based upon several assumptions:

1. The large secondary school is here to stay; and as a school grows in size, there is an increased possibility that the individual approach to educa-

EA 006 738

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

tion will give way to a mass approach.

2. The four functions to be performed in a high school - instruction, guidance, supervision, and administration can be performed better if students, teachers, counselors, and administrators work as teams in a decentralized organizational setting.

3. The central thrust of the S.W.S. program is to humanize, individualize, and personalize education for each student.

Topeka West High School was opened in 1961 and since that time has functioned with the S.W.S. organization. The school was planned architecturally from the beginning to accommodate the house plan.

Topeka West has approximately 1,500 students divided into four houses of 375 students. The students are assigned randomly to the houses without regard to academic ability. An effort is made to distribute the incoming sophomores from each feeder junior high school equally among the four houses.

Each house has an assistant principal, a counselor, and a staff of 8 to 10 teachers. The teachers in the houses represent for the most part the instructional areas of English, social studies, and mathematics.

The more specialized areas of art, music, home economics, industrial arts, science, and media center are located in separate facilities. The school is a campus arrangement with each house being a separate building, science in a separate building, fine and practical arts in a separate building, as well as physical education.

The S.W.S. plan does not, however, necessitate a campus structure. A variation

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of the same concept has been implemented in a multi-story older high school in our same school district.

An attempt is made to schedule incoming sophomores for a third or half of their school day within the house. In earlier times, the juniors and seniors were similarly scheduled; but about two years ago, the school began to allow the upper classmen to choose their own teachers and build their own schedule as opposed to computer placement.

The S.W.S. concept attempts to have the advantages of both the large and the small secondary school. The assistant principal-counselor team can come to know and care about 375 students over a three-year period. In these complex times, it seems even more essential that the comprehensive high school search for ways to address itself to the individual student. "Everybody must be somebody to somebody to be anybody."

Most large high schools are characterized by all of the administrative and guidance services being located centrally. Furthermore, most large high schools usually designate one administrator as being primarily in charge of discipline, that is, a vice principal in charge of vice.

In the house plan at Topeka West High School, the discipline or control of the school is shared by all the administrative staff; and no one person is singled out as the "hatchet" man of the school.

A distinct advantage of the S.W.S. is the decentralization of the administrative and guidance function. The geographic placement of the little school offices in a decentralized setting is extremely important for several reasons.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The assistant principals and counselors are "out there" where the students and teachers are rather than being in close proximity to the principal. Students have frequent perhaps even casual contact with their assistant principal and counselor.

Teachers in each of the houses may step next door to confer with their assistant principal or counselor. It is almost impossible to teach a full day at Topeka West High School without having face-to-face contact with both an administrator and counselor of the school.

The principal's office is located in a special building housing music, art, industrial arts, and home economics. These teachers are more likely to have visual and conversational contact with the principal each day.

Thus all staff members and students are physically located close to a member of the administrative and counseling team; and therefore, the lines of communication are more likely to be open. This physical and psychological closeness enhances staff and student morale. Effective human relations is the keystone to the little school organization.

To use the modern teenage vernacular, it is important to be "where the action is."

There is no scientific evidence to indicate to educators the answer to that most difficult question, "How big should a high school be"? Certainly the large comprehensive secondary school has its unique advantages in economy, and even more important, a widely diverse curriculum. At the same time, the one great danger such a school faces is the loss of identity on the part of its students and staff.

Most administrators and counselors in the traditional large high school can come to know only a small portion of the student body. Usually this portion consists

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

of the very bright and student leaders plus those students who are in some degree of disciplinary difficulty. The vast group of average students too often become immersed in the computer and lost among the mass of students. He can become little more than a name on a grade card or transcript.

Similarly the span of effectiveness for an executive in a business or an administrator in a school is most surely enhanced if the group being supervised is clearly defined and smaller in number.

In summary, a school has to be "a good place to be."

Worst off is he who is convinced by others that he is no good or not important. All of us as human beings need a "how am I doing" refection from our fellow human beings. We are ultimately alone if we cannot care for and depend on someone else.

A good school has to be characterized by an openness, freedom, and responsibility. You can't teach responsibility without first giving it.

In this time of Watergate and Tidal Basins, the words of the existentialist Maslow has some meaning, "Time wounds all heels."

Instead of trying to teach people what they should be, we must help them to become what they may be.

Finally, a good school runs on motivation, conviction, and morale. There is considerable evidence that intelligence is largely a social product. We have to believe that it really makes a difference whether we do well or badly. It can be lowered by a barren life and a dull education, or it can be raised by a rich environment and imaginative teaching.

I hope you will conclude as Dylan Thomas did that "no one should go gently into that good night."